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Draft report

Chapter III

General debate

1. Statements in the general debate were made by the following States members of the Committee on Information: Algeria, Angola, Argentina, Austria (on behalf on the European Union and those countries aligning themselves with its statement), Bangladesh, Belarus, China, the Congo, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Guyana (on behalf of the Rio Group), Iceland, India, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Mongolia, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, Rwanda, South Africa (on behalf on the Group of 77 and China), Switzerland, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. A statement was also made by Sao Tome and Principe, an observer, on behalf of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries.

2. The general debate was preceded by statements by the Chairman of the Committee and the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Department of Public Information.

3. In taking up the substantive questions before the Committee, speakers emphasized the central role of the United Nations in global affairs and of the Department of Public Information as its public voice. Underlining the important role played by the Department in providing "accurate, impartial, comprehensive and timely information" to Member States, one speaker, representing a large group, commended the Department for projecting a positive public image of the Organization. The group particularly appreciated the work of the Department in promoting, through its campaigns, issues of importance to the international community such as sustainable development, decolonization, the dialogue among civilizations and culture of peace and tolerance, the rights of women and children, HIV/AIDS and development on the African continent. Another speaker representing a larger group commended the Department's efforts in raising global awareness on

the above issues, as well as on natural disasters, threats to international peace and security, human rights and matters concerning development. He encouraged similar efforts with respect to the process of reform of the United Nations. Another speaker, who also spoke on behalf of a large group, commended the Department for its efforts to develop a more strategic approach in promoting global awareness and greater understanding of the work of the United Nations in priority areas. In that regard, his group welcomed the identification by the Department of three strategic goals to maximize the effectiveness of its communications work: pursuing well-defined and targeted delivery of information, exploiting ongoing advances in information and communications technologies and building partnerships with civil society. Referring to the Department's reorientation, he said that the measures taken over the past three years should make it possible to further rationalize and optimize the activities of the Department, to maximize the efficient use of its resources and to enhance the visibility and impact of its operations. Another speaker, also representing a large group, acknowledged the importance of the efforts undertaken by the Department and expressed appreciation for those efforts, particularly in view of the difficulties it faced owing to limited resources. The Department's successful promotion of the 2005 World Summit was cited by a number of speakers. One speaker, calling the Summit a true test for the Department, said that the work of the website operation and the audio-visual and photo services deserved only positive evaluation.

4. Several speakers commented on the renewal of the Department through structural overhaul. As a result of those changes, one speaker said, the Department was making the best use of available information and communications technologies, it had a more strategic orientation, its messages were sharper and its target audiences more clearly defined. Another speaker welcomed the Department's new strategic approach, including its emphasis on using information and communication technology and building partnerships with civil society, especially because the Department had to meet its goals "with limited resources while functioning in an often unhelpful environment".

5. Several speakers pointed out the challenges that still lay ahead. One speaker, representing a large group, stressed the importance of a consistent message between the Department and any other entity which provided public information on the United Nations. As part of the accountability and transparency of the Organization, the Member States should be able to first learn about important events affecting the United Nations through the official channels, including the Department of Public Information, rather than through private media. "The General Assembly has a Charter-mandated role of oversight on matters affecting the Secretariat and resources of the Organization. The interaction between the media and the Secretariat does not replace the Charter requirement for the Secretariat to report to Member States through the General Assembly", he emphasized. The biggest challenge for the Department, one speaker said, was telling the United Nations story in a compelling manner and with conviction, to the widest possible audience. The most daunting task was to reach out to the widest possible audience in developing countries which otherwise lacked the resources and technical means to access the story. Another speaker pointed out that the amount of information the Department produced sometimes negatively affected the quality of its presentation. Commenting that press releases were sometimes written in "a dry official language", he advised the

Department to pay more attention to both the language and style of presentation of materials for the media.

6. Several speakers underlined the importance of promoting the dialogue among civilizations. According to one speaker, much of the violence prevailing in today's world was attributable to prejudice born out of misunderstanding, miscommunication or simply lack of communication. The Department of Public Information could play an important role in bridging this gap by fostering understanding, tolerance and cooperation among peoples of different religions and beliefs. To this end, the "Unlearning Intolerance" seminar series initiated by the Department was commended by several speakers. One speaker, while welcoming the series, felt that the Department should also showcase examples of its success in promoting the dialogue, reflecting the rich diversity of world civilizations, cultures and religions.

7. Another speaker, calling upon the Department to pay particular attention to the programmes and activities related to the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, suggested the provision of the necessary objective material to acquaint the international community with the achievements made within the framework of that initiative, the challenges it faced and the priorities that required urgent material and technical assistance. A number of speakers called for extending increased support to the Palestinian people, including through the Department's training programme for Palestinian media practitioners. Voicing a different view, another speaker argued that the Palestinian information programme, which was based on a General Assembly resolution and included an annual seminar, promoted a one-sided narrative. However, he recognized the Department's efforts to make its seminars and materials as objective as possible. Another speaker referred to the General Assembly resolution on the Rwanda genocide and urged closer consultation between the Department and member States in the implementation of the resolution. Preventing further acts of genocide, not only in Rwanda but elsewhere, depended on collective action, consultation and cooperation. The Department had an important role to play in that regard but should, in the future, seek the views of concerned member States in order for such undertakings to succeed.

8. A number of speakers commented on the Department's role in peacekeeping operations and expressed appreciation for its growing cooperation with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. One speaker encouraged the Department to devise and implement a comprehensive communications strategy that highlighted success stories of peacekeeping and the role of peacekeepers in their areas of operation. By appropriately projecting the objectives of peacekeeping operations in different societies, the Department could go a long way in creating good will and a better image for the United Nations, another speaker noted. Another speaker underlined the importance of communication, transparency and evaluation in the planning of peacekeeping operations. Expressing satisfaction at the steps taken to help address the pressing issue of sexual exploitation and abuse in United Nations peacekeeping missions, one speaker said that his country would like to see further improvement in the Department's coordination with other substantive offices and agencies, particularly the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

9. The issue of the "digital divide" drew close scrutiny by several speakers. Referring to the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, held in Tunis in November 2005, one speaker emphasized that the outcome of the

Summit had provided for specific initiatives to be taken at all levels to assist in bridging the digital divide and placing information and communication technologies in the service of development. Another speaker regretted that in spite of the efforts to take the scientific and technical advances in information and communication technologies to different parts of the world, the gap between developed and developing countries was increasing.

10. Several speakers commented on the Department's website operation. One speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, commended the Department for its efforts to attract further users through a redesign of the top-level pages and a new search function. The speaker supported the effort made by the Department to make use of all facets of the Internet's growing multimedia capability by including more webcasts and radio files in numerous languages among its online offerings. The increasing attention to the needs of persons with disabilities was also greatly appreciated. Another speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, expressed the appreciation of his group for the measures taken thus far to boost the accessibility of persons with vision and hearing disabilities to the United Nations websites, and encouraged the Department of Public Information to continue working with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, as well as experts in the field, to achieve greater progress in that area. Referring to the increasing use of the United Nations website, the speaker urged that the additional resources be allocated to accelerate action with respect to parity among the official languages of the organization and the adoption of long-term strategies to strengthen coherence. Elimination of the existing disparities among the official languages on the United Nations website could also be facilitated through greater cooperation between the Department of Public Information and academic institutions, in addition to continued collaboration between the Department, the Working Group on Internet Matters and content-providing offices. Another speaker, commending the Department for redesigning the United Nations website, welcomed its plan to further modernize the website architecture so as to provide even faster access to features that users actually sought out. He welcomed the e-mail service offered by the United Nations News Centre and proposed that the possibility of subscribing to the service from the United Nations home page be considered.

11. Several speakers commented on the multilingual nature of the United Nations website and expressed appreciation for the efforts made to narrow the gap among different languages. However, there were also some concerns. One speaker, representing a large group, said the members of his group remained concerned at the continuing disparity in treatment among the official languages and urged the Department to continue its efforts to attain parity of all the official languages on the United Nations website in accordance with the relevant General Assembly resolution. Another speaker noted that the Arabic page on the website still needed further material and human support, despite the efforts made by those in charge. He emphasized the need to make greater efforts to achieve full parity on the website and the equal distribution of human resources, taking into consideration the fact that Arabic was written in non-Latin letters. Another speaker underlined that existing language disparities on the Organization's websites could also be reduced through greater cooperation between the Department of Public Information and academic institutions, in addition to continued collaboration between the Department, the Working Group on Internet Matters and content-providing offices. Another speaker, while recognizing the Department's efforts to ensure parity among the official

languages on the website, argued that the proposed improvements could not be undertaken simultaneously. Therefore, the Department could make more efficient use of its limited resources by giving greater priority to enhancing the website in the major languages that received the most traffic.

12. The importance of the traditional means of communications, especially radio, was emphasized by several speakers. Representing a large group, one speaker reminded the Department that for many developing countries, the traditional means of communication remained the primary means of communication. The speaker encouraged the Department to continue building partnerships with local, national and regional radio broadcasters to extend the United Nations message to all corners of the world in an accurate, impartial and effective way. Several speakers underscored the importance of local language broadcasts, including Bengali, Kiswahili and Urdu. Another speaker emphasized the effective work of United Nations Radio's live broadcast and commended the Department for launching a number of special initiatives, including the project "60 years in 60 minutes" by United Nations Radio's Russian section.

13. The question of further rationalization of the network of the United Nations information centres was commented on by most speakers. A number of speakers reiterated the view that the presence of information centres in developing countries, in particular the least developed countries, strengthened the flow of information in those countries and assisted them in addressing the disparities they faced. One speaker representing a large group said that any proposal for further rationalization of information centres must be carried out in close consultation with the host countries, other countries served by the centres and the regions involved, and must take into account the geographical, linguistic and technological characteristics of different regions. He also advocated for allocating adequate resources to ensure the effective functioning and strengthening of information centres in developing countries. These views were shared by several speakers, including one who said that the United Nations information centres doting the globe were the real interface between the United Nations and the global community, and therefore the centres, particularly those in the developing countries, including and perhaps especially the least developed countries, should be strengthened.

14. Another speaker, who spoke on behalf of a large group, expressed support for the Department's efforts to improve its working methods, but pointed out that the group was convinced that the regionalization of operations was not a viable option for enhancing the United Nations information and communication machinery. Referring to the Secretary-General's report on the further rationalization of United Nations information centres (A/AC.198/2006/1), the speaker argued that the dramatic change in the pattern of doing business and of serving the media and civil society in a large and distant geographic area from a centralized location had had the adverse effect of reducing the Organization's visibility. Therefore he urged that future action in that area be guided by the lessons learned from the rationalization process in Western Europe. Clearly the successful rationalization of the information centres necessitated increased dialogue with host countries and greater sensitivity to unique regional needs and demands.

15. Another speaker, speaking on behalf of another large group, recalled that the countries belonging to his group had lent their full support to the Secretary-General's 2002 proposals for regional hubs, hoping for real medium- and long-term

benefits to the Organization and the peoples of the world. That decision had forced a number of European countries to take the tough decision to close offices in their capitals. The members of his group had expected the regionalization plan to be advanced more vigorously than it had seen, and had also expected other Member States and regional groups to take equally tough decisions on information centres in their own countries if circumstances warranted. Stressing his group's commitment to efforts to create a network that more effectively addressed the needs of its customers, he encouraged the Secretariat to make all efforts in that regard. He added that the rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres could and should include improving the centres' work through common terms of reference and in-depth evaluation and transparent budget planning. The Department should thoroughly evaluate information centres in cooperation with the Office of Internal Oversight Services, and provide a detailed report to Member States.

16. One speaker, representing a large group of countries, and another delegation renewed the call for the setting up an information centre in Luanda for the Portuguese-speaking African community. Recalling that the Government of Angola had offered rent-free premises to host the centre, he said the costs involved in setting up and running the office would "pale in comparison to the benefits" to be obtained from it by the Portuguese-speaking African community. He argued that the regional approach inherent in the proposal for an information centre in Luanda coincided squarely with the objectives of the rationalization process currently embraced by the Department of Public Information.

17. Another speaker reminded the Committee that the rationalization of information centres was not an end itself, but rather a means of making United Nations information accessible to a greater number of clients without expending additional resources. In developed countries, where the Internet was widely used, and especially in countries where one of the six official languages was spoken, the United Nations website would soon obviate the need for information centres. Therefore, information centres would add value only in countries where none of the official languages was spoken or where Internet services were not widely available.

18. Several speakers, including one who spoke on behalf of a large group, welcomed the new strategic orientation of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, including its redesignation as the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and Knowledge Sharing Centre. One speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, commended the Department of Public Information for making a major effort to implement new activities and foster a culture of management and sharing of knowledge while streamlining traditional library activities. Agreeing with the Secretary-General, he said that the key to effective change in library services lay in the training of staff and in the improvement of internal communications. Another speaker said that his country was convinced of the benefits of the ongoing transformation of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, but stressed that such positive changes should be accompanied by enhanced staff training. Welcoming the recent decision to update the status of the network of communities which shared knowledge, another speaker asked for the Department's opinion on the possible implications for the operation of the United Nations library network as a whole.

19. The new culture of evaluation, based on an annual impact review of the Department's products and activities, was welcomed by many speakers. Expressing the view of a large group, one speaker commended the Department for its efforts to

target products, services and activities, both in terms of relevance and quality. As successful communication rested on the ever deeper knowledge of audiences and their expectations, the systematic impact reviews conducted by the Department for the past three years were important instruments to gauge whether United Nations information met the demands of its users. He encouraged the Department to persevere in its efforts to deepen the culture of evaluation in every aspect of its activities, including products and services. Another speaker stated that the Department needed to appraise and adjust its activities in a timely manner. He stressed that training of staff to continually review the impact of their work was a natural complement to the emphasis on evaluation. It was good that the Department of Public Information was constantly exploring new ideas in that regard.

20. At the concluding meeting of the general debate, the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information provided an in-depth response to a wide range of questions raised by delegations during the general debate.